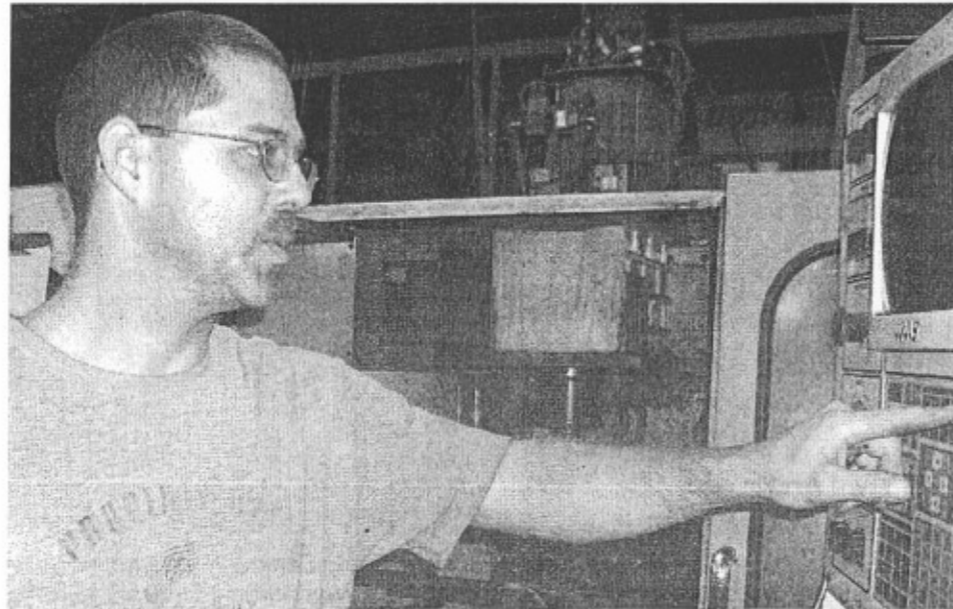


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U.P. group tackles possible worker shortage

HEAD ON

*Audrey LaFave / Upper Peninsula Business Today*

Top photo: P.J. Sarasin of Marble Arms in Gladstone works on a computerized numerical control machine. Bottom photo: Stan Messer, machine operator at Engineered Machined Products (EMP), works with hydraulic components at EMP. Manufacturing jobs like those at Marble Arms make up 23 percent of jobs in the U.P. and are generally well-paying with good benefits. National and regional studies indicate an upcoming shortage in skilled workers for manufacturing jobs.



Manufacturing group planning for the future

By Audrey LaFave*Upper Peninsula Business Today*

ESCANABA — Upper Peninsula manufacturers are facing an impending shortage of workers. The phenomenon is a nationwide epidemic, but here in the U.P. interested parties have formed a regional skills alliance to confront the problem.

The U.P. Regional Industrial Manufacturing Skills Alliance (RIMSA) is a group of educators, economic development and workforce development people whose goal is to solve problems and the current challenges of the manufacturing industry through collaboration.

Holly Peoples, convener of RIMSA, said manufacturing companies are anticipating a

shortage in workers.

"Many people started many years ago and are close to retirement. Younger people are needed to replace those workers," said Peoples.

Peoples explained that now-a-days, manufacturing jobs require technical skills.

"Manufacturing jobs now require a very high level of technical skills," she said. "It used to be that people would just graduate from high school and go to work. That is no longer the case."

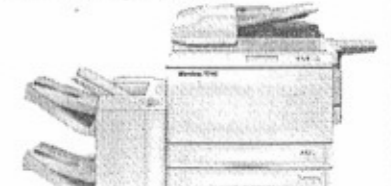
Peoples said RIMSA came into existence after older models became outdated and ceased to be productive.

"In the past all these groups (education, industry and workforce development people) have been working on their own," said Peoples. "If we get together and talk to each other, we can get more work done. The people who actually work in the industry know what they need."

See RIMSA on page 6

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RIMSA: Targeting the

Continued from page 5

RIMSA members recently went to 33 schools in the U.P. to inform the students of the shortage - studies show a shortage of 3,000 U.P. workers by the year 2012. Fields include welders, computer aided design (CAD), engineers, machine operators and many more.

"We put together a booklet, basically targeting high school students and parents," said Peoples.

RIMSA is also working with colleges and universities to make sure what they are teaching is what the industry actually follows.

"Bay is starting a new curriculum in manufacturing and we were able to sit down with them," she said. "That's the great thing about having all these people around the table. We can talk about these issues and come up with some solutions."

Paul Harvey of Engineered Machined Products, Inc. (EMP) agreed with People's assessment. He said that there is an emerging need out there for skilled manufacturing workers.

"According to a recent NMU survey, manufacturing in our region makes up 23 percent of jobs in the U.P.," said Harvey. "Manufacturing is critical to our region. It's expected that just over the next 4 years or so there's going to be a significant shortfall in skilled workers."

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- Manufacturing is critical to the economy in our region — it makes up 23 percent of jobs in the U.P.
- People are retiring from manufacturing jobs at a higher rate than they are starting out in the field.
- Students are not being taught skilled trades like welding and mechanics in high school as much as they used to.
- Studies show these factors combining to create a shortage of 3,000 U.P. manufacturing workers by the year 2012.
- Manufacturing jobs tend to be well-paid with excellent benefits, and are becoming even more so to attract new workers to the fields.

Harvey said the drop in numbers is due to an incongruent number of people retiring from the field and those starting out in the field.

"We're starting to see more and more in the marketplace...that many baby boomers are going to be retiring soon," said Harvey. "Electricians, welders, plumbing and heating people, machine operators - it's going to happen in every industry just because of

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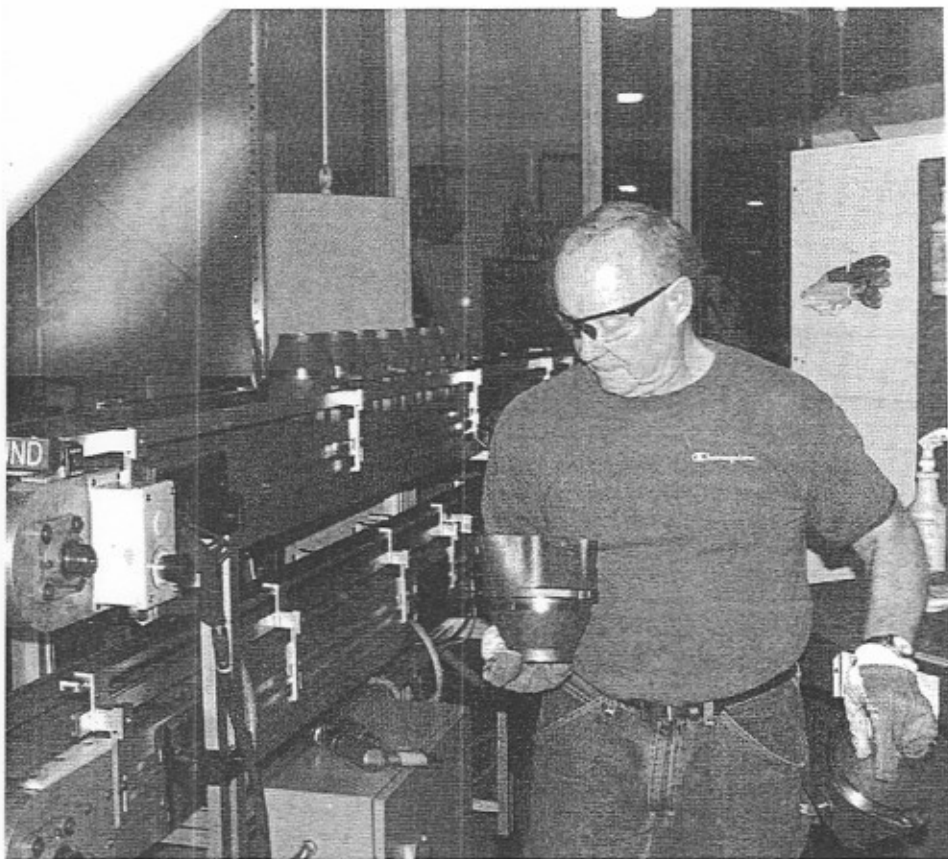


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Stan Messer, machine operator at Engineered Machined Products (EMP), places hydraulic components on a conveyor belt at EMP. It is estimated that by 2012 the U.P. will be short 3,000 workers in the manufacturing field.

the baby boomers."

Steve Pontbriand of Systems Control in Iron Mountain called the problem the "skills gap": the inability of manufacturers to hire employees with adequate knowledge, training and skills.

"As technology advances and baby boomers retire, employers struggle to find workers able to handle the new, advanced manufacturing process, due to a number of factors," Pontbriand said. "The Upper Peninsula Regional Industrial Skills Alliance has been working to begin addressing the myths and the 'skills gap' since April 2005."

Harvey and Pontbriand both agreed, manufacturing jobs are some of the highest paid positions in the U.P. and many offer excellent benefits.

"For young workers seeking a challenging and well-compensated job, manufacturing is the way to go," said Pontbriand. "Manufacturing jobs are in reality stable, family sustaining, challenging careers."

Harvey said the other issue RIMSA is trying to address is where the new workers are going to come from and, will their background and skills training be adequate to meet the demands

including our area, have removed shop classes from the curriculum," he explained. "Those were classes that cultivated skills and long term interest in a skilled trade."

Harvey said shop classes such as welding and mechanics are programs that are needed, because they teach skills for trades that are going to be needed in our area more and more. He said the member organizations and businesses of RIMSA have a common goal to begin collaborating with educators and superintendents like those in the ISD as well as the public school districts.

"(We need to discuss) what the manufacturing industry is going to need and whether there is any way we can work together to fill this gap," said Harvey.

Pontbriand said RIMSA's current focus is reaching out to parents, students and the community to inform them of the positive opportunities in manufacturing careers.

"We hope to establish stronger focus and more open dialogue to continue to build partnerships with the educational institutions in the Upper Peninsula region in order to ensure a highly qualified pipeline of workers, now and into the future," said Pontbriand. "(We need this) to support the economy of the U.P. and it's most impor-